

A Lawyer's Story

Twelve weary months had crept by since I had passed my trying examination and had been admitted to the bar. I hired a cozy little office in a building filled with scores of prominent law firms. After arranging my well-stocked library I nailed up a new sign among the rest and waited for my clients to appear. —It soon became a sad trial of patience.

Among the many brilliant lights of the day my own name passed unnoticed.

Day after day, and month after month, I attended the courts or passed the time in pursuing celebrated trial cases. Like Micawber, I was waiting for something to turn up. The small capital with which I had started was dwindling away at an alarming pace, and, as yet, I saw no prospective fee.

One pleasant afternoon, Stanley Ferris, a young lawyer, who, like myself, was unwillingly idle, dropped in to see me.

“What news, Jack?” he asked carelessly.

“Same as usual,” I responded despondently. “I’ve a notion to pack off in the wilderness for a few weeks. Everybody is out of town, and there is little prospect of picking up a ‘fee’ until they return.”

My friend was about to reply when there came a low rap at the door.

“Come in,” I said carelessly, and thinking it some chance acquaintance.

As the door opened my heart gave a great bound. I found that my long-looked for client had arrived at last. At a single glance I took in all the details of my visitor’s appearance. He was a middle-aged man, dressed in plain costume, and seemingly with a good-natured face. — Most men would have set him down at once as a jolly, open-hearted individual; but I did not. My constant attendance at the courts had taught me much. There was something underlying his oily smile and obsequious manner that made me distrust him.

“Is this Mr. Burns?” he asked blandly.

I bowed in the [affirmative], and requested him to be seated. Stanley left the room at that moment, and the stranger continued:

“My name is Brown, sir; Martin Brown. I have called to see you in a case of emergency.”

“In what way can I be of service?” I asked.

“My friend, who is in a dying condition, wishes you to draw up a will at once.”

I seized my hat and hurriedly followed my visitor. In the elegantly furnished room of a hotel we found the man.

Owing to the heavily-darkened room I could distinguish nothing of his features. He lay with his face turned toward the wall, and in feeble tones dictated the terms of the will as I drew it up.

I accomplished my task to his satisfaction, and placed the document before him to sign. As he did so I noticed a deep red scar running across the back of his hand. The whole of the dying man's property — an immense one, by the way — was left to his dear friend, Martin Brown.

Two of the servants had been called in to witness the signature, and everything was performed according to law.

As I left the house the smiling Mr. Brown handed me my fee. It was a beggarly amount — the more so from the fact that Mr. Brown was soon to become wealthy. The man's wily smile, too, while his friend lay at the point of death, sickened me and I was glad to hurry away.

On my return I met Stanley, and in answer to his inquiries I related the circumstances.

"A beggarly miser," he exclaimed, indignantly, "I'd never believed it from his appearance."

It was nearly a week after this that a young lady, dressed in deep mourning, called upon me. This time I had a case in reality. She was not more than twenty, but her beautiful face bore the impress of deep grief. In a few words she stated her business, retaining the names until she had heard my opinion.

Her story was as follows: Three weeks before her uncle had left home in company with a man he called his friend. When in the city he had been taken suddenly ill and died. She had received no information of the fact until after her relative was buried.

Then came the strangest part of the story.

Two years before her uncle had made a will making her, his only living relative, his sole heiress.

On her arrival in the city, however, she had been shown a will drawn up by her uncle on his death-bed, in which he left his entire property to his friend.

She could conceive of no reason for such a strange act, and distrusting fraud, had sought out a lawyer. Luckily she was unacquainted with the name of our distinguished lawyers. My glaring good sign had been the first to catch her eye, and she called on me.

"The case certainly looks suspicious," I remarked. "I think I will be able to make a fight in your behalf. Now, will you kindly furnish me with the names of these parties?"

"My uncle, sir, was Andrew Thurber. His friend calls himself Martin Brown."

Involuntarily my pen dropped from my surprised fingers. It was the very will I had drawn up myself.

She turned pale as I related the circumstances and rose to leave.

“I see I have made an awkward mistake in calling upon you,” she said sadly.

“Wait one moment,” I replied quickly. “This Martin Brown is a total stranger to me. If he has been engaged in an act of villainy I shall not shield him.”

We entered into a close conversation, at the end of which I said, confidentially:

“Leave the case to me. If I fail it shall be through no fault of mine.”

She accepted my offer with thanks, and left me, thinking deeply.

During the interview I had learned that the deceased had no scar upon his right hand. Now, certain of villainy in the affair, I set to work diligently to find it out.

Working cautiously I found the man who had lain the body out for burial. From him I learned that he had performed his task on the morning of June 23, just ten hours after I was called upon to draw up the will. The will had already been offered for probate, so there was no time to be lost.

Andrew Thurber’s body was disinterred and the contents of the stomach analyzed. It was found to contain poison.

By some means the sly wretch got wind of my movements and attempted to fly. At that moment the detective seized him. Confronted by the terrible proofs he made a full confession.

Before his trial came off he ended his fate by swallowing a quantity of the same deadly poison with which he had killed his victim.

Miss Thurber met with no further obstacles in regaining her rights.

Something still more important happened to me from my connection with the case. I wooed and won the beautiful girl for my wife. As Stanley Ferris remarked afterward, I “gained fame and fortune with a rush.”

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